

Comics- Meet the Artist With Bill Holbrook Creator, "On the Fastrack"
Hosted by Suzanne Tobin
Washington Post Comics Editor
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http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/01/comics_083101.htm

Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion,
hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

While doing editorial cartoons for a newspaper going through a difficult merger, artist Bill Holbrook found the material for his first successful syndicated comic strip, "On the Fastrack". The cartoon chronicles the comic misadventures at Fastrack Inc., a mirror of the contemporary work scene.

Holbrook will be online Friday, Aug. 31 at 1 p.m. EDT to answer questions and take comments about his daily cartoon.

Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans, to our biweekly "Comics: Meet the Artist" discussion with Bill Holbrook, creator of "On the Fastrack." As those of you know who follow the strip, Bud and

Chelonia are about to have a baby. And being the techies they are, they've decided to "Webcast" the birth. So on Monday (Labor Day--get it?) readers can go to www.onthefastrack.com/birth to see the animated arrival of the new character. Welcome, Bill, where are you speaking to us from?

Bill Holbrook: I'm coming to you from Memphis, Tenn., where I am attending the Furmeet, a comics convention where I'm hawking my new book, "Surviving Y2K," which is the Fastrack strips from the year 2000. And I'd just like to thank everyone for meeting me here in cyberspace.

Sorrento, La.: All three of your comics feature computers and high technology prominently. Since these have in many ways enhanced, and even empowered the lives of disabled people like myself, will we ever be seeing disabled people in any of your comics?

Frederick J. Barnett

Bill Holbrook: I would like to have a disabled character if I can think of a way to do it that's funny and original. I wouldn't do it just to do it.

Falls Church, Va.: What is your all-time favorite cartoon or cartoonist?

Bill Holbrook: Easy. Charles Schulz.

Arlington, Va.: How come we don't see so much of Melody, Bob and Lauren any more? Has Wendy basically taken Bob's place in Ms. Trellis' hierarchy?

Bill Holbrook: Yes, Wendy has taken Bob's place. Bob has since married Melody and Melody is now in charge of Fastrack's day care center, so when the new baby arrives we'll be seeing more of her. Bob was the main character when the strip started, but I found the issues of a single white male were just not that interesting. A married working mom had a lot more on her plate, and with many more issues to deal with, there's more fodder for material. Another possibility is that Bob was based on myself, and I'm just not that interesting.

Bronx, N.Y.: Rose Trellis is a great name for a character. Where do you derive inspiration for your strip On the Fastrack?

Bill Holbrook: The inspiration for On the Fastrack came from my experiences in working for the Atlanta Constitution. When I was working there in 1982, they merged with the Atlanta Journal. The papers had been on two different floors in the same building and then they merged operations. And all of us in the art department got to see all the office politics going on. And I got enough material to last 20 years.

As for Rose, I really can't remember when the idea for her name came to me, but it just seem to fit. A rose and a trellis, and the idea of climbing.

Arlington, Va.: What happened to your Internet only comic strip... was it called Kev and Kel?

Bill Holbrook: It is called Kevin and Kell. It still exists at www.kevinandkell.com, and it is a daily strip. It's about a male rabbit who meets a female wolf online and they fall in love before finding out what the other one is. It's been going on since 1995. We've just announced a patron program where we're going to appeal to readers to contribute at various levels--kind of like what they do in public broadcasting. All the information is on the site, so feel free to support it.

Nashville, Tenn.: In the early days of "On the Fastrack", there were Sunday strips. Any chance we'll see them again? You expanded "Kevin and Kell" from five days a week to six and then seven.

-- Reece Morehead

Bill Holbrook: There have been On the Fastrack Sunday strips continuously since 1984, however King Features does not post any of the Sunday strips online. So my advice is to lobby your local paper to carry the strip.

Mt. Rainier, Md.: On The Fastrack is so great! You have an incredible imagination and obviously you love your characters -- you can make a dragon a sympathetic character, you can even make a CPA sympathetic! And it's nice (as a programmer) to find a strip that tackles our little peculiarities.

Bill Holbrook: I really appreciate the encouragement and I hope you continue to enjoy the strip.

I have friends from high school and college who are programmers, and I grew up in Huntsville, Ala., home to Marshall Space Flight Center, so it's a very techie place. I usually rely on those friends for "deep background."

Arlington, Va.: You're writing and drawing three nationally distributed comic strips. How do you do it? Do you have a staff? Or a life? (smile)

Bill Holbrook: I have no staff, but I do have a life. As far as doing three strips, I'm on a very set schedule. For instance, this past week, I have been thinking up three weeks worth of material for Kevin and Kell while drawing up three weeks worth of Safe Haven strips. Next week, I'll be drawing the Kevin and Kell strips, while thinking up three weeks of On the Fastrack strips. And the week after that I'll be thinking up Safe Haven, while drawing the Fastrack strips. I couldn't do it if I didn't love it, which I guess is the key. As for my life, I am married to a mystery writer named Teri Holbrook and we have two girls and one dog.

Herndon, Va.: Is Teri Holbrook planning to write more of her wonderful mystery novels?

Bill Holbrook: Her latest one is called "The Mother Tongue" and it came out from Bantam Books in paperback in February. She's taking a break right now to get her master's degree in education.

Salem, Ore.: So now we know which character is based on you, anyone based on your wife?

Bill Holbrook: I put a lot of Teri into Wendy and also into Kell. Both Art and Wendy and Kevin and Kell have strong marriages, and I base a lot of that on ours (we've been married 15 years.)

Sorrento, La.: Why do Chelonia and her brother have such long necks?

Bill Holbrook: It was mainly a visual device that came from when I created the characters. Chelonia actually is the word that is the scientific classification for turtles, and when she first came into the strip, she was so shy she would occasionally draw her head back into her shirt. Now that she's more outgoing, she doesn't do that anymore. She's come out of her shell. Since she and her brother are twins, they look alike. When I eventually had their father join the strip, I had to show where the necks came from, so he was like that

too.

Mt. Rainier, Md.: Please warn Teri; teaching is a lot more frustrating than writing -- even with writer's block! And since Teri's NOT getting remaindered, it doesn't pay as well either.

Bill Holbrook: I'll tell her that.

Arlington, Va.: Are there any up-and-coming young comic artists we should be paying attention to?

Bill Holbrook: A lot of the good ones can be found on the Internet. David Simpsono does "Ozy and Millie"--that's about kids; Pete Abrams does "Sluggy Freelance"--that's really indescribable; Jeff Darlington does "General Protection Fault" which is a techie strip and Ian McDonald does "Bruno the Bandit" about an inept medieval thief. Those and many more are worth a read.

Baltimore, Md.: Do you do anything else besides the daily cartoon -- I mean, is there another side to Bill Holbrook... oil painter? Carpenter? Computer hacker?

Bill Holbrook: With three daily strips, I really don't have time. :)

Washington, D.C.: Do you think you deal with controversial issues in your strip?

Bill Holbrook: I do. Here's a sneak preview of one. It turns out that the reason the Moat Monster is able to morph, is because they find she's made entirely out of stem cells. That's coming up in October.

Washington, D.C.: Suzanne... and Bill,

Don't you think papers should start running more edgy cartoons. It is 2001. Is anyone really reading Apt. 3-G? Mary Worth?

Bill Holbrook: I can't comment on what papers carry. It's against the cartoonists code of ethics.

Suzanne Tobin: You would surprised how many people love those "soap opera" strips. I certainly wouldn't want to be the one to pull them, but it is a shame that we don't have unlimited room to run more comics. You would not believe the gnashing of teeth that goes on here each time we want to add a new strip, because that means we have to drop an old one. And people are VERY protective of the comics they read. And with 800,000 daily subscribers, it's not easy to please

them all.

Sigh: When was the last time you punched the clock regularly in the corporate world? I mean, working for a newspaper ain't exactly Microsoft. I just feel that your cartoon, and Dilbert, are becoming less and less connected to the realities of today's corporate workplace.

Bill Holbrook: That's a fair question. I've never actually punched a clock, since I was hired by the Constitution right out of college. But I do feel that I'm able to write about these character's lives because they've become real to me.

Washington, D.C.: Any kids? And, if so, what do they think of the cartoons? Have you ever considered doing a strip more geared toward children?

Bill Holbrook: I have two daughters. When I became a dad, all these childhood gags started coming out. So in 1988, I created a strip about kids called "Safe Havens." It started as a day care strip, and they were preschoolers for five years, but in 1993 I started having the characters age one year, every year. So it's followed them chronologically since then. Now the characters are 14 years old. As long as the strip goes on, they'll keep aging, and I'll follow them through college to the adult world. And, who knows, they may end up having kids!

Culpepper Va.: Hi Bill, I really like the way you draw. It's very expressive. Do you use a pen and ink or do you use a computer? Or both? Did you study art in school?

Bill Holbrook: Thanks for the compliment. I studied illustration and visual design at Auburn. (War Eagle!) As for doing the strip, I draw it with pen and ink, and scan it at 600 dpi and work on it some more in Photoshop, where I add grays and textures. I use a mechanical pen called a Rapidograph.

Salem, Ore.: With day care coming to Fast Track are we going to see some of the same type of material that Safe Havens used in the early period?

Bill Holbrook: Probably not, because what we'll be doing is how the kids react to a corporate environment.

Philadelphia, Pa.: Did you want to be a cartoonist as a child? When did you know that you could effectively combine words and art to get a desired result?

Bill Holbrook: I've never NOT wanted to be a cartoonist. I literally have no memories of not wanting to do what I'm doing now. As a kid, I would draw on walls and my parents would bring home big pieces of

paper from work (my dad worked for a technical testing firm in Huntsville) and I would draw all over them. I created characters in elementary school and did cartoons for my high school paper. In college, I created a strip called Fenton Farnsworth, and it ran in the Auburn Plainsman. (It was your standard college comic strip.) I tried to get it syndicated, but noone wanted to buy it.

Sorrento, La.: Of the three comics you do, which one is your favorite, and why?

Bill Holbrook: That's impossible to answer. They each have three different types of humor and I like revisiting them at the start of each week.

Salem, Ore.: How long does it take you to do the actual drawing on a daily strip?

Bill Holbrook: I'm glad you said the "actual drawing" because the writing can take anywhere from hours to minutes. But the drawing itself...I can do a daily strip from start to finish in about 30-45 minutes.

Fairfax, Va.: Hello Mr. Holbrook,

One of the things I like best about OTF is the plot twist you managed without making the characters behave against their nature. I was wondering how far in advance you plot out your storylines?

To Ms. Tobin,

I know there is a limited amount of space in the print edition of The Post, but could you make the Sunday OTF available at The Post?

Bill Holbrook: I work about two months ahead, but I have an idea about where the story's going for about maybe a year after that. And the same holds true for my two other strips. It's just a matter of having an idea of a destination before you start off on a trip.

Arlington Va.: Hi Bill and Suzanne, I love graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's "Maus." I was wondering if you had recommendations of other graphic novels. Bill, have you ever experimented with graphic novel techniques?

Bill Holbrook: First of all, let me say that "Maus" is the mountainpeak of graphic novels. I mean, it's the Everest. As for other recommendations, I can't give you any because it's not really my field.

I did do a 24-page Kevin and Kell comic book last year, that shows exactly how they met and how they got married. It was called "Origin of the Species," and it's published by Plan Nine Publishing. And so far that's my only attempt at it. I think it's available on Amazon. Or you can check out the publisher's Web site at www.plan9.org.

Bill Holbrook: I want to thank everyone for joining me online. I hope it's been informative and I hope I've given you some insight into the world of my strips. If anyone is in the Memphis area, today and tomorrow, I'll be at the Holiday Inn Airport at the Furmeet convention. Please stop by and say hello.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks for being so generous with your time today, Bill. (I mean you could have drawn a whole strip in the time you gave to us!) I'm sure we all appreciate it. For those of you who didn't get your questions answered, feel free to e-mail Bill at btholbrook@compuserve.com or me at tobins@washpost.com. See you again in two weeks!